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ABSTRACT

An analysis of a number of university-school collaborative efforts in the United States and Canada to establish professional development schools, and of action research efforts in the United Kingdom, has shown that the partnership efforts studied devote significantly less attention to ideas about the nature of learning, teaching, schools, and teacher learning than the attention they devote to the mechanics of establishing the partnerships and to the interpersonal relationships involved. The thinking and activity of many such efforts, including teacher education reform efforts, are not congruent with the research literature or reform-oriented scholarly writing on learning, the knowledge base for teaching, adult learning, reflective practice, and teacher development. As the appropriate next stage, it is recommended that university-school partnerships and teacher education reform efforts be merged with broader-scale school renewal efforts and be rethought to include recent conceptualizations of the nature of learning, schools, teaching, and teacher professional development. Four visions are suggested as part of the rethinking: (1) see learning as experience-based intellectual construction; (2) see teaching as professional problem-identification and problem-solving; (3) see schools as morally based communities of learners; and (4) see professional knowledge, competence, and values as developments from reflective practice. (Contains 27 references.) (JLS)

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Reconceptualizing Learning, Teaching, and Schools as the Next Stage in Teacher Education Reform and School Renewal

a

paper presented

by

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at

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Reconceptualizing Learning, Teaching, and Schools as the Next Stage in Teacher Education Reform and School Renewal

This paper is an outgrowth of my analysis over the last five years of a number of university-school collaborative efforts in the United States and Canada to establish partnerships or professional development schools, as well as of a parallel inquiry into several action research endeavors of university faculty in the United Kingdom. The analysis was intended to accomplish the following purposes:

1). to identify the conceptual bases upon which university-school professional development partnerships rest, including their undergirding images of
   (a) the nature of learning
   (b) schools as places, institutions, and organizations
   (c) teaching as a professional endeavor (What teachers do and why they do it)
   (d) the nature of the knowledge base for teaching
   (e) the ways teachers learn and develop professionally;
2). to compare these conceptualizations with ideas described in recent research and scholarly literature and related appeals for education reform;
3). to determine the extent to which those who conduct university-school partnerships and PDS endeavors follow their own conceptualizations in practice;
4) to assess the extent to which the conceptualizations enhance or inhibit the partnership efforts;
5) to propose additional (possibly new) conceptualizations about schools, learning, teaching, professional knowledge, and teacher professional development that will improve reform and partnership efforts.

The analysis shows that the partnership efforts that I studied (and probably partnership, PDS, and teacher education reform efforts in general) devote significantly less attention to ideas about the nature of learning, teaching, schools, the knowledge base for teaching, and teacher learning and professional development than the attention they devote to establishing university-school arrangements, to the mechanics of the operation, and to the interpersonal relationships involved in bringing university teacher educators and pre-K-12 teachers together. The main focus of nearly all university-initiated reform efforts is inducting new teachers into schools. Little attention is devoted to helping university teacher educators or experienced pre-K-12 school faculty to improve their work or to reform what they do. In essence, the beginning teachers, interns, and student teachers are seen as *those to be taught* and the university faculty and experienced classroom teachers are seen as *those who already know*. The general goal is to prepare beginning teachers better than "the old way."

In essence, the thinking and activity of many (probably most) university-school partnerships, PDS efforts, and teacher education reform endeavors in general in the United States and Canada are not congruent with the research literature or reform-oriented scholarly writing on learning, on schools as organizations, on school leadership, on the professional nature of teaching practice, on the knowledge base for teaching, and on adult learning, reflective practice, and teacher development. The efforts tend to concentrate on helping teacher inductees, to see these new teachers as the only primary learners among the professionals involved (they see university-faculty and experienced teachers as teachers of the inductees, not as learners), to devote most of their efforts to structure building, mechanics of operations, and interpersonal relationships.

The efforts accept their participating schools as they are at the start of the collaborative except for the new induction process; they see teaching as a craft taught to novices by those with more practical experience; they understand the knowledge base for teaching as craft knowledge rather than constructed from theory; and they overlook the learning needs of university teacher educators and experienced teachers except when university faculty teach pre-K–12 teachers a new curriculum package or approach to teaching. To a great extent, they perpetuate the following ideas that educational scholars and reformer thinkers challenge: learning as the absorption of information; schools as technical-rational, top-down, factory-like institutions; teaching as non-theoretically-based craft; a dichotomy between educational research and practice; a dichotomy between pre-service and in-service teaching; experienced teachers as having little need for continued learning and change; and university professors generate new knowledge about teaching, pre-K–12 teachers do not (they *only* teach).

As the appropriate next stage in teacher education reform and school renewal, I recommend that university-school partnerships and teacher education reform endeavors in general be merged with broader-scale school renewal efforts and that they be radically rethought so that they seriously incorporate into their goals and operations more recent conceptualizations of the nature of learning, of schools, of teaching, of the knowledge base for teaching, and of teacher professional development. I suggest that if this is not done, many university-school partnerships and similar teacher education reform endeavors will consume much energy while they continue to be nothing more than new arrangements to induct beginning teachers into ineffective, static schools, in a professional environment that views teaching in an outdated way--as a craft-like practice.

I propose that this "radical rethinking" include the formulation of at least four visions of what student learning, teaching, schools, and teacher knowledge and competence should look like in the years ahead and that these four visions guide teacher education and school reform efforts.

These visions are:

(1) Learning as experience-based intellectual construction

With this conceptualization, learning can be understood as a three-part intellectual process by which learners (a) gain ideas from new learning experiences, (b) match these ideas with what they have already learned, and (c) construct their own personal meaning, develop their own competence, and formulate their own values. The process occurs not only for students engaged in experiences provided by teachers, but also for everyone, all of the time. Every life experience provides new information for a person to construct and reconstruct his or her personal intellectual frameworks, and this, in effect, means everyone is always a learner.

This conceptualization of learning has direct implications for school students, teachers, and school leaders. It means that students do not just absorb sets of ideas, skills, and value perspectives that their teachers give to them. Their learning involves much more and is more personally formulated than the old idea of a product received from teachers and schooling. The conceptualization also means that teachers and school leaders are also always learning professionally.

(2) Teaching as professional problem-identification and problem-solving

With the conceptualization of learning outlined above, teaching can be conceptualized as a career-long process of professional problem-identification and problem-solving, a process that starts when future teachers are still classroom students and does not stop before retirement, if it stops then. The process consists of two successive teacher tasks: (1) figuring out ways in which

to educate the students for whom the teacher is responsible, and (2) trying in the classroom what he or she thinks will work. When the problem-solving is successful, students learn. When it is not, teachers learn from the experience, reassess, and try to solve the problem again.

When teaching is thought of as professional problem-identification and problem-solving in this way, it becomes a professional intellectual investigation that includes constant personal construction of new professional knowledge, constant personal development of refined professional skills, and constant personal sorting out of professional value perspectives. Teachers come to understand, more clearly than most now do, that they do not learn to teach by simply receiving information from others or by replicating the teaching that they experienced. They *construct* their own professional knowledge, skills, and value perspectives by drawing on all of their life experiences and formulating from them their own unique professional ways of understanding and doing things.

(3) Schools as morally based communities of learners

When schools are conceptualized as cultural communities of inquiry rather than physical places, buildings, organizations, or institutions, they have a mission and shared core values. All community members--students, teachers, school staff, and parents--possess a sincere commitment to achieving the mission and believe in the core values sincerely and deeply. They belong to the community and are wanted by all of its members. They possess a sense of loyalty, and collegiality that draws everyone into a common bond. Individual attachments to the community are so strong that they supersede individual personal desires so that everyone helps each other toward their common goals. In essence, a shared mission and a common belief in core community values permeate every aspect of school life and guide and drive every school decision and activity.

(4) Professional knowledge, competence, and values as developed from reflective practice

When the professional knowledge, competence, and value perspectives that teachers possess are conceptualized as knowledge that is personally constructed by teachers, competence that is personally developed by teachers, and value perspectives that are personally formulated by teachers in the context of their professional work, teacher education and learning can be seen very differently in several ways from ways they are typically described:

(a) The professional knowledge, skills, and values of teachers are seen as constructed by teachers themselves rather than absorbed from elsewhere.
(b) Teachers construct and develop their knowledge, skills, and values in the context of how they *use* that new knowledge, and those new skills, and values.
(c) The places that teachers turn to as sources of knowledge, skills, and values are not all external to themselves and their classrooms. Teachers also generate their own educational theories from their personal teaching, reflection on that teaching, and self-analysis.
(d) Because teachers are adults and continuously developing professionals, all the principles of both adult learning and evolutionary professional development apply to their learning and, in turn, to their evolving knowledge, skills, and value perspectives. At any given time in their individual careers, teachers possess ideas, competencies, and value perspectives that are different from those they possessed a short time earlier or will possess a short time in the future. They, like all humans, never stop thinking, learning, and changing.

If visions of learning, teaching, schools, and professional teacher knowledge, competence, and values are set on the horizon somewhere out in front of all those of us who hope to improve schools, those visions can serve as beacons in the distance toward which we might move. They

can guide our school reform and partnership efforts toward the ideals we have in mind. They can focus us on the future, so we can look ahead, instead of over our shoulders at the problems and failures we want to avoid. They can move us away from deficit ideas toward a progressive orientation. They can help us design journeys of change that lead toward our visions. They can help us build paths for our journeys.

The formats of this paper and the session in which I am presenting it have required that I be very brief and general. I will provide more details, particularly on the four visions I have sketched here and on how we might conduct our journeys toward them in a soon-to-be released book, *Creating Learning Community Schools: Where Everyone Learns and Likes It* (with Douglas J. Simpson, Corwin Press).

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